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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001720

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, DS/DSS/ITA, S/CT;
NSC FOR E. MILLARD; LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [EAIR](#) [ASEC](#) [MV](#) [IN](#) [SE](#)

SUBJECT: Incident remains very murky, but hijack attempt near Maldives may have had an Islamic connection

Refs: (A) USDAO Colombo Ce IIR 6 816 0113 02
- (B) USDAO Colombo Ce IIR 6 816 0111 02
- (C) Port Louis 1059
- (D) Port Louis 1055
- (E) USDAO Colombo Ce IIR 6 816 0110 02
- (F) Colombo 1662, and previous

(U) Classified by W. Lewis Amselem, Charge d'Affaires.
Reasons 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) Summary: Amid many conflicting, convoluted reports, Mission has received tentative information that the attempted hijacking of an Air Seychelles flight near the Maldives last week may have had an Islamic connection. Information is very sketchy, but DAO has learned that of the ten men now in detention in the Maldives one may be a Bangladeshi national and some of the rest Muslims from the Indian state of Gujarat (Mission has received late word that some of these men have been released). Given the timeframe of the incident (just before the 9/11 anniversary), this latest information is possibly indicative of some sort of Islamic extremist plot, although it is not conclusive in any way. A/RSO, previously scheduled to travel to the Maldives on September 17, will coordinate with Maldivian authorities in an attempt to gather definitive information about this murky incident. End Summary.

2. (C) Mission continues to pick up conflicting and convoluted reports about the September 9 attempt to hijack an Air Seychelles flight near the Maldives. Initial reports indicated that the attempt was carried out by an apparently unstable individual, an Indian national armed with a knife, who was apprehended by cabin personnel when he attempted to break into the cockpit. Subsequent reports indicated that the Maldivian authorities were holding ten of the plane's passengers for investigation, all apparently Indians with Hindu names (see Para three). Per Ref A, DAO sources now state that of the ten men being detained in the incident at least one may be a Bangladeshi national and at least some of the others Muslims from the Indian state of Gujarat. This is the first information that Mission has received indicating that the incident may have had any Islamic connection. According to DAO sources, there is also new information that those detained may have wanted to take the aircraft to an unknown destination in the Middle East. (Note: Late September 16, Mission heard that nine of the ten men detained were released.)

3. (C) The latest information that at least some of those detained may possibly be Muslims contradicts earlier reports that made out the alleged perpetrators to be Indian nationals who were apparently Hindus based on the names in their passports. Sources now report that the passports of those detained may have been forged, perhaps in Nairobi, Kenya. (Note: Ref B contains a list of the purported names of those detained. Initial Washington checks have turned up no information on these names.)

4. (C) Despite the new information, there is still no indication on whether the attempted hijacking involved a political motivation, such as Islamic extremism. For their part, the Maldivian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Maldivian National Security Service have told Mission that they do not (repeat not) believe that the attempted hijacking had an Islamic extremist motivation. They note, however, that their investigation into the case is continuing. Mission understands that the Indian government is also looking into what transpired. (Note: The Indian High Commission has confirmed that Prime Minister Vajpayee plans to travel to the Maldives at some point in the next week on a long-planned visit.)

5. (C) Comment: Given the constant swirl of conflicting reports, the whole incident seems murky at best. The latest information that the alleged perpetrators of the attempted hijacking may be Muslims is very tentative, but it raises the troubling question of whether the incident involved some sort of Islamic

extremist plot. It should not be overlooked, for example, that the incident took place on September 9, just before the one-year anniversary of 9/11. (Note: According to press reports, three men carrying knives were also detained by Indian authorities on September 9 for attempting to board a flight to Riyadh at Bombay's international airport.) The possibility that the incident also involved passports forged so as to make the bearer out to be a non-Muslim is also interesting from a modus operandi standpoint.

16. (SBU) In an attempt to gather definitive information, A/RSO, previously scheduled to travel to the Maldives on September 17, will coordinate with Maldivian authorities about this murky incident. End Comment.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

AMSELEM